



Klamath Network Featured Creature

December 2004

Clark's nutcracker (*Nucifraga columbiana*)



Photo Credit: Jim Rosso



Photo Credit: Greg Askins

FIELD NOTES:

General Description: The lively Clark's nutcracker (*Nucifraga columbiana*), first observed on 22 August 1805 by William Clark of the Lewis and Clark expedition, is one of three nutcracker species that occur worldwide, all in the northern hemisphere. It is a large (11-13" long), noisy gray bird with black wings. This handsome species is related to crows, magpies, ravens, and jays, other members of the family Corvidae.

Ecology: The Clark's nutcracker, which feeds on and disperses the seeds of the white or soft pines, is considered a keystone species of the subalpine whitebark pine (*Pinus albicaulis*) woodlands of the American West. The nutcracker has a strong beak for severing seed scales and an undertongue pouch to store seeds. A single nutcracker can harvest over 100,000 seeds in the fall, and then use them to feed its young in the following breeding season. It has an amazing ability to store seeds and to remember where the caches were stored, even under deep snow.

Nevertheless, some seeds in the caches do sprout, making nutcrackers one of the most important agents for establishment of the whitebark pine (*Pinus albicaulis*). The relationship between the Clark's nutcracker and the whitebark pine is an exceptional example of *mutualism*, the ecological relationship between two or more species where the growth and survival of both populations is benefited, and neither can survive indefinitely under natural conditions without the other.

Where to see them in the Klamath Parks: The West Rim of Crater Lake National Park is an exceptional place to see these birds. Indeed, it can be hard to miss them. Like all corvids, these bold, intelligent birds are well aware of visitor use patterns and the spoil that often follows, making them *loud and proud* visitors to the Rim Village and mountain camp sites in summer. They can also be seen throughout the high elevation backcountry of Lassen Volcanic National Park, and are frequently seen on the trail to Bumpass Hell and environs.